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Views and Reviews of Iowa

The whole story of Iowa's past can never be written. The dreams of the pioneers, the struggles of the settlers with droughts and chinch bugs, and the shadows of five wars — all these evade the historian as he strives to recapture the past and look into the future. Many of these human experiences lie buried with the men and women who dreamed and toiled, laughed and grieved, in the building of the State. Fortunately, however, some of these contemporary records have survived in guide books, diaries, and autobiographies, as well as in books wholly within the province of the historian.

Iowa had a past long before Congress opened the Black Hawk Purchase for settlement in 1833. Geological ages bequeathed to her material wealth in the form of rich and deep soil which was protected from erosion through the centuries before the farmer took over the land, by the penetrating roots of the prairie grass. Recorded history began as early as June of 1673, when Louis Jolliet and a black-robed priest, Pere Marquette, guided their party in canoes down the flooded Mississippi, the Messipi as they called it. They noted

the verdure of the Iowa bluffs, the abundant bird life, and the ceremonious hospitality shown them at an Indian village.

Jolliet's report was lost by shipwreck, but Marquette's records were sent to Quebec, and then to Paris where they became a part of the *Jesuit Relations*, now a treasure store for American writers of fiction and of history. Other explorers, in the day when Spain and France claimed Iowa, charted the Des Moines River as the "Riviere des Moingona" and the river-to-river trail of the fur traders across northern Iowa as the "Chemin des Voyageurs".

From the first of June, 1833, when Iowa was first opened to settlers, down to 1870, when the frontier had definitely passed beyond the Missouri, Iowa was the goal of American and foreign land-seekers. The information which interested Iowans and would-be immigrants to Iowa came largely through "guide books", small volumes designed to attract settlers. In form and content they were the literary descendants of the plantation tracts which Captain John Smith, William Penn, and New Englanders sent back to England to explain the economic and religious advantages of life in the new colonies.

The earliest and for Iowa the most important of these guide books was Lieutenant Albert Mil-

ler Lea's *Notes on Wisconsin Territory; Particularly with Reference to the Iowa District or Black Hawk Purchase with a Map*. The little volume was printed in 1836, two years before the Territory of Iowa was set off from Wisconsin Territory. Under the title, *The Book That Gave Iowa Its Name*, a facsimile reprint of this volume was issued by the State Historical Society in 1935.

Lieutenant Lea wrote not from hearsay but from actual experience. In charge of one of three companies of dragoons, he broke paths through the tall prairie grass from the mouth of the Des Moines River, riding first northwest and then northward and northeastward into southern Minnesota, fording the Skunk (then called by its more euphonious Indian name of Chacagua), the Iowa, the Cedar, the Wapsipinicon, and the Upper Iowa rivers.

In 1838, John Plumbe, Jr., published his *Sketches of Iowa and Wisconsin, Taken During a Residence of Three Years in Those Territories*. Very clearly he stated his hope that his little guide would be "the means of effecting some good, by assisting in directing the attention of Emigrants and others, to a portion of the United States, which all, who have examined it, unite in representing . . . as 'one of the finest domains that nature ever offered to man.' "

A few years later John B. Newhall wrote three guide books dealing with Iowa. He not only wrote in glowing and enthusiastic terms about Iowa; he lectured to prospective settlers in Birmingham, Liverpool, and London about Iowa's soil and resources. The first of his books, *Sketches of Iowa, or the Emigrant's Guide*, appeared in 1841 and the second, *The British Emigrant's Handbook*, in 1844. The third was *A Glimpse of Iowa in 1846*. In all, he pictured Iowa as an inviting place, almost a Utopia.

In the years just before the Civil War, Nathan H. Parker wrote a series of guide books on Iowa — *Iowa As It Is in 1855*, *Iowa As It Is in 1856*, and *Iowa As It Is in 1857*, with the sub-title *A Gazetteer for Citizens, and a Handbook for Immigrants*. He also published *The Iowa Handbook for 1856* and *The Iowa Handbook for 1857*.

In the seventies the Iowa Board of Immigration officially supervised the preparation of additional guides to attract immigrants to Iowa. In 1870, *Iowa: The Home for Immigrants* was published in German, Dutch, Danish, and Swedish, as well as in English.

Guide books have sometimes been turned to frankly propagandist ends. The Columbian Exposition in 1893 stimulated zeal of this kind. The Iowa Commissioners issued *A Hand Book of*

Iowa with the scintillating sub-title, *The Brightest Star in the American Constellation*, which was distributed to visitors in the Iowa Building.

The most ambitious of later guide books, *Iowa — A Guide to the Hawkeye State*, was published in 1938 by the Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration. It not only gives a general survey of the State and enumerates the number of miles of dirt, gravel, and paved roads in Iowa, but it describes sites of historic events.

The most recent guide book appears in a new guise, bearing the title *The State of Iowa Welcomes You*, its cover resplendent with colorful pictures of the Mississippi and Old Capitol. Published by the State of Iowa in a most attractive form, it gives statistics of Iowa's excellence in agriculture and education, pictures of historic sites, such as the Floyd Monument and Hoover's birthplace, and specific directions for reaching Iowa's many State parks.

Men of a different frame of mind have left permanent and very human records of their experiences in Iowa in the form of diaries and autobiographies. First among these was *The Autobiography of Black Hawk*, giving the experiences of an Indian in Illinois and Iowa. Dictated in 1833 to Antoine LeClaire and published in 1834 by

J. B. Patterson, this unique autobiography reveals Black Hawk's motives for starting the war which bears his name, describes his family and tribal life, and explains his religious beliefs.

Cyrus Sanders, a pioneer surveyor, kept a diary as he traveled by coach to Burlington in 1838 and trekked on foot from there to Salem and on to Iowa City. He recounted his difficulties in finding his way through the pathless prairie grass, criticized the greasy, ill-smelling food and the dirty bed linen of the taverns, and bemoaned his hopeless bachelorhood when he found himself forced to sew buttons on his shirts or to mend his pantaloons.

A very different diary was kept by Ephraim Adams, who came from Andover, Massachusetts, in 1843 with the Iowa Band, whose eleven members had adopted the slogan "Each to found a church and all a college". In 1870 he incorporated into his book, *The Iowa Band*, long passages from his diary. With touches of pathos and humor, he described the experiences of a young minister who had looked forward to preparing sermons in a quiet study and found himself forced to compose on horseback, or behind a patchwork quilt which separated his sanctum from the main room in some pioneer cabin.

Less strenuous days brought a degree of leisure

unknown in the 1830's and 1840's when the search for food, clothing, and shelter dominated life. Men and women turned to the writing of their life stories against a background of Iowa's material and cultural growth.

In 1917 Henry Wallace, editor of *Wallace's Farmer*, published *Uncle Henry's Own Story of His Life*. In a series of simply worded letters addressed to his great grandchildren he sketched from experience many phases of pioneer life, among them husking bees, quilting parties, coon hunts, and square dances.

Perhaps the most representative autobiography written in Iowa, by an Iowan, is *One Man's Life*, Herbert Quick's story of his life, describing his book-hungry boyhood, his debt to the McGuffey readers, and his work as school teacher, reporter, lawyer, and editor. In the background runs the history of agriculture and politics in Iowa, the basic material for his trilogy, *Vandemark's Folly*, *The Hawkeye*, and *The Invisible Woman*.

Nor did the white settlers in Iowa lose interest in the primitive people they had displaced. The most complete survey of the Iowa Indians was *The Red Men of Iowa*, prepared by A. R. Fulton, and published in 1882. Out of print, and today a rare book for the collectors of Iowana, it contains invaluable accounts of many individual Indians,

including Black Hawk, his rival, Keokuk, the Ioway chief, Mahaska, and his beautiful wife, Rantche-wai-me, who insisted on accompanying her husband to Washington to see the Great White Father.

Mrs. Abbie Gardner Sharp published the *History of the Spirit Lake Massacre and Captivity of Miss Abbie Gardner* which has often been reprinted. As one of the two survivors of the attack made by the Sioux Indians in 1857, she vividly described the attack, the murder of her family, and her forced captivity under Inkpaduta until she was ransomed for two horses, thirty-seven yards of calico, two kegs of powder, and a few other items.

One hundred years after Black Hawk dictated his autobiography, Cyrenus Cole wrote *I Am A Man — The Indian Black Hawk*, which was published by the State Historical Society of Iowa. The first part of the title was taken from the greeting with which Black Hawk, the captive, opened his interview with Andrew Jackson, President of the United States, "I am a man. You are another."

As life settled down to routine living, Iowans began to assemble the records of communities, counties, and the State. The first of these volumes were frequently combinations of guide books

and histories. In 1858 Franc B. Wilkie published his *Davenport Past and Present*, a treasure house of materials on eastern Iowa before the Civil War.

About this time, too, came the first county histories, beginning with one of Des Moines and Polk County in 1857. After the Civil War, when associations of old settlers became popular, numerous papers read at the annual picnics helped preserve many human interest stories. As an example a story presents the picture of a family of seven riding to church on two horses. The mother, with the youngest child in her arms, sat in the saddle; the oldest boy sat on a pillow behind his mother with the next to the youngest between them, while the father, on the other horse, managed his second and third offspring as best he could.

It was not, however, until the Centennial Exposition of 1876 made Americans history conscious, that county histories became general, some written by individuals who financed their own publications. These were followed by county histories largely financed by commercial companies. Those issued by each company followed a set pattern, containing identical material on the Presidents and on State history. The companies followed the policy of securing one man in each township

to be responsible for the history of the press, bar, schools, railroads, churches, military activities, and representative families in his district. An "historical writer" was then sent out from headquarters who sought to contact the past-minded citizens and then wrote the history.

The second wave of county histories came in the late eighties and early nineties. These were largely biographical in material and ornate in binding. County histories in a third series which appeared from 1910 to 1918 were published by commercial companies in two volumes — the first historical, the second biographical. These, like the preceding groups, were usually sold in advance by subscription, the subscribers paying well for the biographical sketches and for their portraits.

The last series of county histories was prepared by the Iowa Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration and appeared early in the nineteen forties. This series includes less than twenty Iowa counties. Often they add new material by supplying folklore, songs, and ballads collected in the counties, or add later historical events such as a diamond jubilee in 1910 or some centennial celebration. Some bring the history up to date with accounts of new murals in Federal post offices, the acquisition of an art museum, or the use of a recreational lake within the county.

All in all the ninety-nine counties of Iowa have produced some three hundred county histories. One may seek in vain for an index and criticize the faulty assembling of material in many of these county histories, but the seeker after details concerning the pioneers, the early press, the Fourth of July celebrations, and entertainments at rural fairs is eternally grateful for these records, and the historical and biographical material thus salvaged has saved many a worthy blacksmith or justice of the peace from being wholly forgotten.

Out of the accumulation of letters, newspaper files, old settlers' memories, and county histories — to mention but a few sources — Iowa's past has been viewed and reviewed in several histories. In 1875, A. T. Andreas, a Chicago editor and publisher of midwestern histories, compiled an *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa*. Between its covers he enclosed many excellent prints of Iowa farmsteads, old mills, and public buildings as well as historical sketches and maps of the counties.

Iowa will always be indebted to William Salter, not only for his share in the Iowa Band but for his *Iowa: The First Free State in the Louisiana Purchase*. As his beginning date he used Marquette's and Jolliet's discovery of Iowa in 1673 and closed with Iowa's admission in 1846.

Two noteworthy single volume histories of Iowa are Irving B. Richman's vividly written *Ioway to Iowa* (1931), and Cyrenus Cole's *A History of the People of Iowa* (1921). In a revised form the latter was re-issued in 1940 under the title, *Iowa Through the Years*. Both hold a reader's interest as they describe how the State changed from the fighting ground of the Sauk and the Sioux to an agricultural and commercial region supporting over two million people with all the comforts which civilization affords.

Nor have the young people of Iowa been neglected in the field of history. In 1916 Henry and Edwin S. Sabin published *The Making of Iowa*. Two volumes of juvenile history were published in the twenties — *The Story of Iowa*, by Thomas P. Christensen in 1928 and *Stories of Iowa for Boys and Girls*, by Bruce E. Mahan and Ruth A. Gallaher in 1929. Ten years later John E. Briggs published *Iowa Old and New*.

Three men devoted years of their lives to the writing of general histories of Iowa — Benjamin F. Gue, Johnson Brigham, and Edgar Rubey Harlan. The first of these was Gue's *History of Iowa From the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century*, published in 1903 in four sizable volumes. Knowing life in Iowa for sixty years, Gue, quondam pioneer editor, legislator,

and Lieutenant Governor, wrote of people and events from actual experience.

Johnson Brigham spent seventeen years in the State Library with statistics and records close at hand before he published in three large volumes his *Iowa, Its History and Its Foremost Citizens* in 1915. From his experiences as editor of the *Cedar Rapids Republican* and of the *Midland Monthly* and from wide reading he compiled his account, incorporating in his history many notable biographical sketches.

Edgar Rubey Harlan published his five-volume *Narrative History of the People of Iowa* in 1931. The last three volumes contain brief biographies of Iowans prepared by a special staff of writers from the American Historical Society, a commercial company.

Outstanding contributions to the history of Iowa have been made by the State Historical Society of Iowa, which for many years was under the direction of Benj. F. Shambaugh, its superintendent and editor from 1907 to 1940. Since its organization in 1857, the Society has issued some one hundred and fifty volumes on Iowa history and over one hundred volumes of historical periodicals — *The Annals of Iowa* (First Series), the *Iowa Historical Record*, *The Iowa Journal of History and Politics*, and *The Palimpsest*. In addi-

tion to his editorial and administrative work for the Society, Dr. Shambaugh was himself the author of several volumes, including *The Old Stone Capitol Remembers* and *The Constitutions of Iowa*.

Although Iowa is fortunate in possessing these and many other views and reviews of her past and although of the writing of histories there is no end, every writer and every reader interested in Iowa's past knows that much that went into the making of the State has never been fully reported. Official records and historical accounts often lack human interest. Poets and prose writers of today and tomorrow can revitalize many of these stories by humanizing them into living portrayals of Iowa's pioneers and their descendants.

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